

The Blackbuck of Sikandra Uttar Pradesh

BY

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(With two plates)

Akbar's Tomb, one of India's outstanding archæological monuments, is located along the Delhi-Agra highway at Sikandra, six miles north of the city of the Taj. Thousands of tourists annually visit this impressive monument while travelling this route. Most visitors, however, are not aware that the enclosure behind these historical ruins contains a small herd of blackbuck—beautiful antelope which are unique to India. Historians have recorded that, during the reign of Akbar the Great in the latter part of the 16th century, over 1,000 Indian cheetahs were kept solely for hunting the fleet-footed blackbuck which then roamed the surrounding plains in herds of hundreds. The cheetah has since entirely disappeared from the Indian sub-continent and the blackbuck is presently becoming rare. It appears that blackbuck perpetually inhabiting the area dedicated to Akbar's memory would be a fitting tribute both to this man and the royal sport to which he was so dedicated. At the alarming rate at which these animals are presently disappearing, they might shortly become an even greater tourist attraction than the ruins which they inhabit.

Dr. George Schaller and I visited Sikandra the first part of February 1965. We counted a total of 128 blackbuck within the 50-acre enclosure and recorded sex and age ratio data. Only a few small young were present. Dr. Schaller returned to Sikandra the latter part of February and reported that five head had recently died, apparently from malnutrition or disease. The high walls surrounding the monument probably restrict the entry of dogs or other predators which might prey upon the captive herd. However, during the months between March and May most of the vegetation in the area becomes very dry and it was readily apparent that the carrying capacity of the forage within this enclosure was being exceeded, particularly during this time of year.

Messrs. Joel Cohen, Rames De, and I visited Sikandra in the latter part of January 1966. We counted a total of 104 blackbuck and again recorded sex and age ratio data. Therefore, during the intervening year the herd had diminished by almost 20%. While meeting with Forest Department officials in Delhi in the first part of February, Mr. E. P. Gee and I were informed that it had been proposed that the blackbuck be

removed from Akbar's Tomb and the area utilized in the present 'Grow More Food Campaign'. We therefore travelled to Agra and met with Mr. S. N. Singh, Superintendent of Archæological Gardens in India, on February 17. Happily we found that it had not been proposed that all of the blackbuck be removed, but only a part of the herd. We spent the better part of a day at Sikandra discussing the 'deer park' and photographing the animals. Mr. Singh solicited our recommendations, which are as follows :

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the back (east) half of the 50-acre deer park be left untouched—a regular jungle of native plants, which will provide cover and a natural setting for the enclosed animals and also provide nesting cover for birds.

2. That if one-half of the 50-acre compound is watered the number of animals retained inside be not more than 100 (i.e. 75 blackbuck, 12 chital, and 12 chinkara).

3. That if one-fourth of the area is watered (as at present) the number be reduced to a maximum of 75 animals (i.e. 60 blackbuck, 7 chital, and 7 chinkara).

4. That, if possible, in either case approximately 60% of the animals should be males (i.e. 45 male plus 30 female blackbuck and 7 male plus 5 female of both chital and chinkara). Males are more spectacular as a tourist attraction and a predominantly male sex ratio would reduce reproduction, and hence the efforts needed to maintain no more than the desired number of animals.

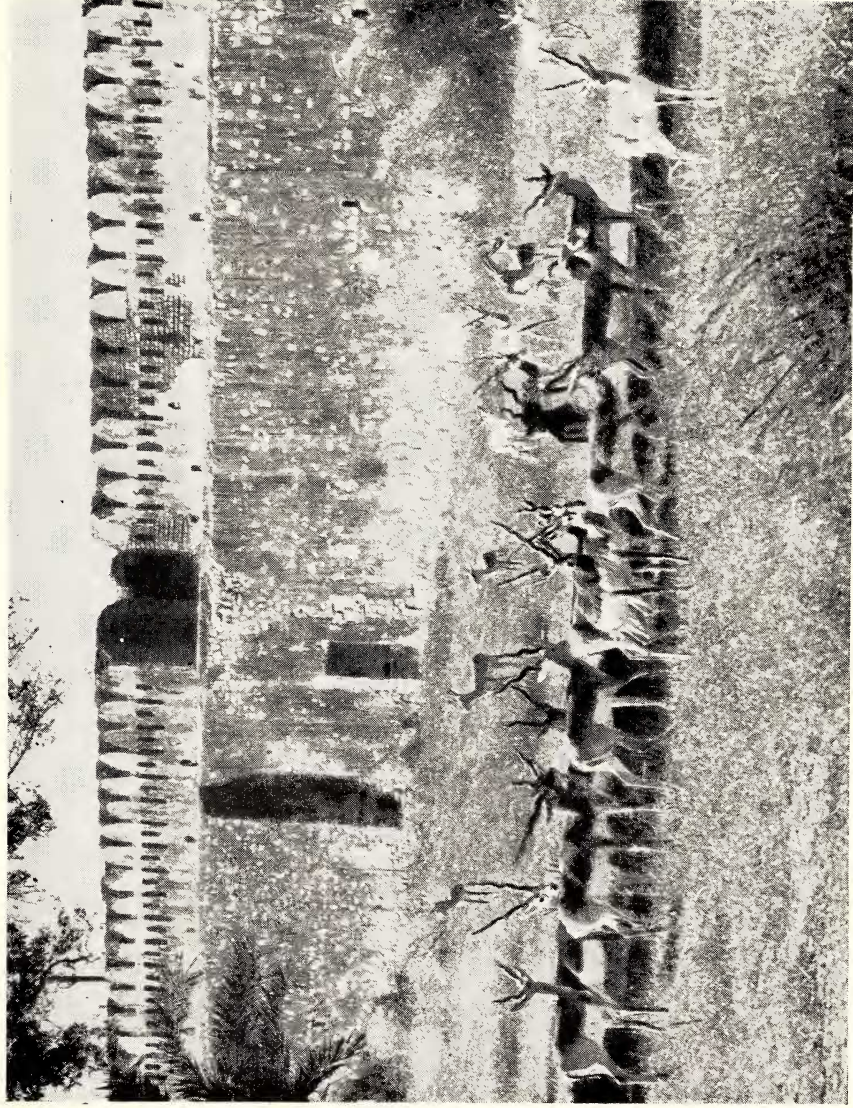
5. That if wild birds are introduced into the deer park, they be restricted to species presently or formerly inhabiting the area around Agra. For example, peafowl, red jungle fowl, and grey partridge.

6. That necessary precautions be taken to ensure that animals introduced into the park are healthy and free from diseases. Otherwise, their introduction could have disastrous results upon the fine herd already present.

7. That the deer park receive ample publicity along with the archæological attractions in the area. Blackbuck, chital, and chinkara are all species unique to India. In addition to being beautiful animals, blackbuck and chinkara are also becoming so rare that it is becoming increasingly difficult to see them in their natural setting. This park would readily provide people with this opportunity.

8. That a waterhole and salt-lick with suitable hides be provided so that those who so desire can closely observe and photograph these unique animals without disturbing them.

Spillett : Blackbuck



Blackbuck in the walled-in enclosure behind Akbar's tomb at Sikandra, U.P.

(Photo : E. P. Gee)